ARABIC GRAMMAR

A FIRST WORKBOOK

G. M. WICKENS

Professor of Middle East and Islamic Studies, University of Toronto

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1980
Reprinted with corrections 1984
Reprinted 1989, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1998

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Wickens, G. M.
Arabic grammar.
1. Arabic language–Grammar. 1. Title.
PJ6307.W48 492′7′82421 77–82523

ISBN 0 521 21885 3 hardcovers
ISBN 0 521 29301 4 paperback

CONTENTS

The numbers in parentheses refer to paragraph numbers

INTRODUCTION

This introduction to the major practical realities of Standard Arabic, covering as far as possible both "Classical" and Modern styles, was first put together in the early 1960s. About that time I became obliged, by the growth of my University department and of my general administrative and teaching responsibilities, to hand over the arduous task of teaching Introductory Arabic to another colleague. It was felt desirable to maintain an exact standard of method and coverage which could be counted upon by all the other Toronto instructors teaching the Islamic languages or using Arabic in their "disciplinary" classes. During the last fifteen years or so the material, in xeroxed form, has not only been used regularly at the University of Toronto in this way, but also read and commented on by colleagues in the Arabic and related fields at Toronto and elsewhere. These commentators were generally favourable, most to the point of urging publication. The present version takes account of their criticisms as well, and of those made by the readers designated by the Cambridge University Press.

The book makes no claim to have removed, or even to have fully elucidated, all the difficulties normally encountered in starting Arabic; nor to have provided the ultimate methodological tool which renders all earlier work redundant. In some respects it is quite traditional, in others "modern", in yet others original and innovative. What it *does* consciously attempt is to address itself, more than is usually the case in such works, to the hard, recurring realities of the language itself, especially in the related matters of sight-reading and syntactical structure; to the particular problems Arabic in actual use presents to English speakers; and to the general linguistic knowledge and skills present-day learners may (or, more likely, may not) bring to their task. In this last connection, it has become ever safer to assume that a majority of one's students will understand virtually nothing about language as a "system" or an organic reality, and absolutely nothing about traditional grammatical concepts. As a reaction sets in against the fashion for unstructured and non-humanist education, however, it seems (at least to judge by recent experience at Toronto) that this situation may improve somewhat, but the results will still take several years to work through the educational system and society at large.

All this being so, no attempt is made to present a comprehensive, quasi-synchronic, normative, "homogenised" review of Classical Arabic on the lines of, say, W. Wright's standard *Arabic Grammar*, or even in the fashion of A. S. Tritton's *Teach Yourself Arabic*. Indeed, any feature of (e.g. Koranic) style that

does not recur regularly in the post-Classical or the Modern language is avoided as far as possible, or relegated to a footnote and so designated. Traditional preoccupation with the rare or even unique occurrence (*hapax legomenon*), beloved of both Arabic and Western grammarians, is considered to have no place here.

Similarly, the purely scholarly tone is avoided, on the assumption that most learners nowadays have neither strict scholarly training nor scholarly ambitions – at least to become in any sense classical philologists or historians. Learners of Arabic today often know no other language at all well, if at all; they are almost always totally innocent of Latin and Greek. They usually want Arabic for a variety of reasons other than intellectual or philological interest: to read newspapers, or political or business documents; to study Islamic sociology, or the history of philosophy, religion or science; to use the Standard as a yardstick of reference for the practical learning of one or more colloquials – which they may eventually meld with it in varying degrees, as do educated or partly educated Arabs themselves. And so on.

A different type of approach that is handled with equal restraint here is that of modern linguistics. It cannot be questioned that modern linguisticians have brought some liberating and efficient attitudes to the study of language (though many individual teachers had seen the light long before it became a blinding glare). But much of the new operation, like that of the so-called "New Mathematics", is at the philosophical rather than the practical level. Moreover, the linguisticians have created new obfuscations of their own: in particular, a highly specialised terminology in phonetics and syntax, and a reluctance to enunciate principles that may not be universally applicable or ultimately valid, however useful for the study of a particular language or family of languages. Because an inexact concept such as "word" is difficult to accommodate in some languages and not acceptable within the full rigour of linguistic analysis, for example, there is no good reason to eliminate it from the practical study of a language like Arabic, particularly at the introductory level. Again, though the spoken word is undoubtedly primary in the Aristotelian sense, and in time and volume, one must not ignore the fact that Standard Arabic (whatever it may eventually become) has always been essentially the high-culture vehicle of a literate society, not a specialised and refined form of everyday speech. (Striking evidence for this is the relatively low idiomatic content of the Standard, at least until modern times, as compared with the colloquials or with the "living" languages like Persian and Turkish.)

On the positive side, this work presents the basic "facts" of Arabic in some sort of pragmatic order (e.g. verbs before nouns in the first instance), and as they are likely to occur in actual use (e.g. Broken Plurals ahead of Sound Plurals). One major consequence of the latter consideration is that the student is urged from the outset to read unvowelled (unvocalised) texts. This is not simply a case of "sink-or-swim" treatment: the nature of written Arabic is such that one not only *must* learn to vocalise correctly, but *can* usually do so as an integral part of

structural understanding. Offering fully or partially vocalised texts distracts and confuses both eye and mind. It also fosters permanent dependence on someone else's supposedly superior knowledge of the language: one of the results of introducing vocalisation in some modern Arabic books (though not all, and never in newspapers or journals), together with a fundamentally un-Arabic and unnecessary punctuation, is that even some educated Arabs nowadays never advance beyond a sort of partial literacy. One of the greatest risks with vocalised texts is that they may contain numerous errors, due either to editorial ignorance or to incompetence on the part of the printer.

As an élitist language, written Arabic has been so idiosyncratically developed and analysed that, wherever possible, it is best presented in its own terms. This is, of course, a cliché of the more flexible linguistic thinking, but it needs stressing in the case of a language which has both its own "classicism" and its own original "linguistic science". Accordingly, while avoiding the extreme Latin or "Common European" grammatical approach on the one hand, and the rigid modern linguistic and phonetic systems on the other, I have combined the Arabic categories (e.g. for verb "tenses") with my own *ad hoc* purely practical explanations, hints and short cuts. (Some of these are very much of the "*i* before *e* except after *c*" variety, and will need to be modified at an advanced stage.) If such a method irritates established scholars, it will surely help those faced with the difficulties of actually learning the language or of explaining its peculiarities, simply and effectively, to those who want to (as one of my students has said) "get a handle on it" as quickly as possible.

In short, the purpose of the work is to get the beginner into Arabic and over the hurdles that often daunt him before the race has begun. Above all, it is to instil confidence that there are systematic "tricks of the trade" for tackling the basic problems, and that these can be acquired within a reasonable time (say, one year) by practice and repetition.

Because the book is directed alike to teacher, student and self-teacher (as well as because it arose out of "live" classroom experience), it has a personal style that may annoy those who prefer the traditional detached cataloguing of phenomena. The grammatical explanations and analyses (*Vocabulary and remarks* sections) are worded very much in this spirit, with constant stressing of essential features, reminders of earlier occurrences of the same phenomenon, relation of the actual occurrence to the basic general explanation, and so on.

The philosophy behind the book's methodology is set out in the various sections of para. 12. Much more exercise and drill material could have been included, especially in the early chapters, as well as more elaborate follow-up advice for later work. In both cases, however, this would not only have drastically increased the size and cost of the book, but also imposed a framework of action and reference on its users both cramping of initiative and inappropriate to the situation. Virtually all the Arabic passages, short or long, are real, not made-up material.